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Living the Dream? Birgit Vanderbeke's Perspective on Happiness in *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst* (1999) and *Der Sommer der Wildschweine* (2014)

In an interview in 1998 entitled 'Himmelfahrt und Happy-End' Birgit Vanderbeke commented that she had fulfilled a dream by having moved from Germany to the South of France.¹ A year later her reflections on this move came to the fore in her novel *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst*, in which the female narrator tells, often with humour, of her family's new life in the French countryside. Whilst living between two languages and between two cultures is viewed as a source of inspiration for the writer, daily living is not always as idyllic as it may seem.² Vanderbeke's latest novel, *Der Sommer der Wildschweine* (2014), revisits the theme of seeking well-being in another country, but this time the dream holiday destination is in danger of being destroyed by man (fracking) and beast (boars). In this discussion I will reflect on how these two novels show that the potential for finding happiness and living the dream, in the short term (*Wildschweine*) or long term (*Ich sehe was*), lies in a different cultural environment and may be achieved when a person's perspective on life, including their work, is challenged. For the purposes of my analysis the concept of 'living the dream' will differ from the old German proverb of 'Leben wie Gott in Frankreich', which, in general terms, refers to living a life of pleasure.³ I will also

¹ Himmelfahrt und Happy-End. Birgit Vanderbeke im Gespräch mit Hans-Ulrich Probst. In: Richard Wagner (ed.): *Ich hatte ein bißchen Kraft drüber. Zum Werk von Birgit Vanderbeke*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2001, p. 142-55. The interview was first aired on radio on 19.02.1998.

² Another German writer who has a home both in Germany and Southern France is Christoph Meckel. In 1997 he published an autobiographical work entitled *Ein unbekannter Mensch* in which he portrays his seventy-four-year-old neighbour, a lavender farmer in the mountains of the Drôme. Like Vanderbeke, Meckel also takes the opportunity to draw comparisons between the French and German via his protagonist. Christoph Meckel: *Ein unbekannter Mensch*. 5th edn. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1999.

³ The expression 'Leben wie Gott in Frankreich' is actually an old German proverb which translates into English as 'to live like a bee in clover'. The most common explanation for the origins of the proverb dates back to the French Revolution, when it was claimed that God no longer existed, which meant that he no longer had anything to do and could now lead an uncomplicated, peaceful and happy life with no more responsibilities. The belief that a French lifestyle can offer a carefree and enjoyable existence is very much embedded in German culture. The problem is that such a saying also underscores a common idealized perception of another country's way of life. In 2001 Vanderbeke was among a number of German authors at the Salon du Livre in Paris, where she appeared in a panel discussion entitled "Le Bonheur de ne pas être chez soi", along with Barbara

illustrate how in Vanderbeke's works the focus on sustainable living alongside new technology can lead to life satisfaction and a harmonious work-life balance, in spite of the fact that today's globalized and digitized culture contains many stresses and various threats to happiness.

According to Daniel Haybron, in his discussion of the nature and significance of happiness, "there is no point trying to define 'happiness' once and for all: the word has too many meanings for that".⁴ He posits three answers to the question of what people are seeking when they want to be happier, namely a favourable attitude towards their life (the life satisfaction theory); a favourable emotional condition (the emotional state theory); or pleasure (hedonism). In discussing Vanderbeke's narratives, it will become evident that she refers to all three concepts of happiness in her portrayal of the lives of her first-person narrators.

Vanderbeke's choice of the south of France as a permanent or temporary destination for seeking and finding happiness as explored in these two novels is entwined with her own biography. For over two decades she has been living in the South of France, in St-Quentin-La-Poterie, a tiny village outside of Uzès in the Languedoc. It apparently took just three weeks to find a house to call home and only three months later she and her husband and their seven-year old son were moving in; yet according to Vanderbeke it took three years before the family actually felt at home.⁵ The initial experiences of this uprooting are recounted by the female narrator in the author's most autobiographical novel to date, *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst*.⁶ Like the narrator, Vanderbeke spent a brief period in 1992 in Berlin before deciding to move to Provence in 1993, exchanging city life for the countryside.⁷ The decision to leave Germany for France was not only based on happy childhood holidays in France, but on the desire to provide her young son with a less dangerous environment. She had experienced an aggressive, dangerous Berlin, where child fatalities were being caused by reckless drivers; where children regularly took

Honigmann and Gila Lustiger, who also live in France. They follow in the footsteps of well-established writers, including Heinrich Heine, Heinrich Mann, Kurt Tucholsky and Ernst Jünger. The act of moving from one country to another, often in search of a better quality of life, and thereby fulfilling a dream, is not just common to German authors. For centuries, southern France has attracted tourists, emigrants, artists and celebrities, particularly from northern Europe, who have followed their desires for a less stressful life by settling in this region. In 2009 the director Sebastian Dehnhardt filmed a documentary about Germans who had relocated to the area, entitled *Leben wie Gott in Frankreich – Eine Zeitreise an die Côte d'Azur*.

⁴ Daniel Haybron: The Nature and Significance of Happiness. In: Susan A. David et al. (eds): The Oxford Handbook of Happiness. Oxford: OUP, 2013, p. 303-14, here p. 303.

⁵ Susanne Schaber: Provence: wo das Licht dem Meer begegnet. Oasen für die Sinne. Munich: Carl Hanser, 2010, p. 21f.

⁶ "Ich borge der Erzählung Teile meiner Biographie. Es ist ganz offensichtlich, dass das jetzige Buch eines meiner privatesten ist." Irene Niessen: Birgit Vanderbeke: Ein Gespräch über das Leben und die Liebe. In: Fischer Lesezeichen, 4 (1999), p. 6.

⁷ Vanderbeke's parents had moved the family from East Germany to Frankfurt am Main in 1961, when she was aged five.

knives to school; where discrimination against women was rife; where there was prejudice and hatred between West Germans ('Wessis') and East Germans ('Ossis'), East Germans and Poles, and all were antagonistic towards the Turkish community. She no longer felt happy and safe in Germany.⁸ Her feelings are also reflected in the narrative: couched in simplistic, but effective terms, the narrator draws attention to the continuing divide between East and West German attitudes:

Immer wollte der Osten der Westen sein, und dann war er es, und als er es war, wollte er es nun plötzlich doch nicht sein wegen der Mieten und Arbeitslosen, und der Westen mochte den Osten nicht haben wegen der Krankenkassenreform und der Steuern und wegen der komischen Einkaufsbeutel, die sie dort einfach weiterbenutzen, und also blieb der Osten der Osten und der Westen der Westen, alle waren unzufrieden und schlecht gelaunt [...].⁹

The narrator initially moves from East to West Berlin but the change is not marked enough: both sides of the city have the same street names; the primary school teachers are also called Gaby and are likewise ecologically-minded; the postmen do not like climbing the stairs to her flat; the same dangers face women walking alone outside at night; crime is rampant everywhere. The narrator's search for happiness involves a complete change of environment: a new start for mother and child, new friends, a new language, new traditions, a new culture, even a new education system.¹⁰

For Vanderbeke the move from Germany to France provides an opportunity to expand on differences and prejudices in her portrayal of German and French characteristics and stereotypes. She initially makes a tongue-in-cheek caricature of uninvited German visitors, and later of German tourists in general. The German reader is meant to learn to laugh at his/her own foibles. A German couple, friends of a friend, arrive unexpectedly at the narrator's home, where she finds them seated at her dining table, helping themselves to her wine. The first thing the man wants to do is phone his workplace: the business would collapse without his checks throughout the day. The next day, dressed in colour-coordinated pink and bright green, tight-fitting lycra cycling gear with matching helmets, "Plastikschüsseln" (p. 42), the fitness fanatics set off on their mountain bikes, their "Flugmaschinen" (p. 73). Complaining is the couple's forte: neither the food nor the wine is right; dogs and children should be neither seen nor heard; the evenings are too quiet; the weather is too hot; the wife is allergic to the midges. For them a holiday is a "verschärfter

⁸ Wiebke Eden: *Keine Angst vor großen Gefühlen. 11 Schriftstellerinnen – ein Beruf*. Berlin: edition ebersbach, 2001, p.174-97.

⁹ Birgit Vanderbeke: *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst*. Berlin: Alexander Fest, 1999, p. 8f. Further references will be provided in the main text.

¹⁰ In the narrative the choice of southern France is linked to her son's love of Asterix and its setting of Gaul. Provence was originally ruled by the Gauls before the Romans conquered the region during the first century B.C. and called it *provincia*.

Existenzkampf" (p. 45). The visiting husband even suggests ways of rebuilding the house, so as to make money out of having guests to stay.

This notion of going into battle and only the fittest surviving is reiterated in the description of the behaviour of the German holidaymakers on market days. The focus is on how loud they can shout to one another across the crowds of shoppers and the fuss they make at the supermarket till over the cost of German sliced sausage, which they cannot do without on their holiday. The depiction by Vanderbeke of German tourists is of course stereotypical and full of clichés. It is one aspect of the book that has not always appealed to reviewers, but we should be mindful of the fact that this is quite deliberate.¹¹ Vanderbeke makes a point of including humour, often very dark and, at times, self-deprecating, in all her works: "Ich halte Humor für eine erkenntnisfördernde Haltung".¹² Whilst adding a humorous touch, these caricatures illustrate the extent to which the narrator is becoming assimilated into French society; the more she adapts to her new surroundings, the more she distances herself from her homeland and is able to observe from a different perspective. The turning point, her personal 'Wende', occurs when she plucks up the courage to tell the unwelcome German couple to leave at once.

It is worth noting at this point that the new life of the narrator is not viewed through rose-coloured spectacles. Vanderbeke does not romanticize the new experiences of her narrator and thus she questions the idealized view of living the dream. Admittedly, the French are portrayed as cheerful and relaxed, child friendly and animal loving; the neighbours give good advice; the children are courteous and shake hands; the teachers are genuinely concerned about their pupils. The darker side of Provençal life manifests itself rather in nature: the unusual weather phenomena, such as sudden storms that last for days and cause floods; forest fires in the heat of the summer; the destructive, cold mistral wind that can drive animals and people mad. The house into which the narrator and her son move is damp, has scarcely any heating and is infested with ants, spiders and scorpions. In the summer there are the midges and wasps with which to contend. But nature is not just irritating, for, as is evident from the many references to van Gogh's 'Starry Night

¹¹ Negative comments by reviewers about the stereotyping of German holidaymakers include Ingo Arend: Der Wille zum Glück. In: Der Freitag, 13.08.1999 and Ingo Arend: Flucht aus Absurdistan. In: Der Spiegel, 09.08.1999.

Another contemporary German writer, Richard Wagner, employs a similar tongue-in-cheek attitude to that of Vanderbeke, when he notes in his novel *In der Hand der Frauen* (1995) that the Germans' love of France begins in Strasburg: "Das Elsaß macht ihnen den Einstieg leicht, und so dringen sie immer weiter vor, bis sie dann dort sind, wo sie immer schon hin wollten, in der Provence." (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995), p.103. For further discussion of tales of relocation by contemporary German authors who have made their home abroad, see Petra M. Bagley: *Mein Mallorca: A German-Spanish Love Affair*. In: Anthony Barker (ed.). *Identity and Intercultural Exchange in Travel and Tourism*. Bristol, Buffalo and Toronto: Channel View, p.36-46.

¹² Niessen: Birgit Vanderbeke: Ein Gespräch über das Leben und die Liebe, p. 7.

over the Rhône', which provides the cover sleeve of the first edition and was the inspiration for this story, the stars and the vast expanse of sky are overwhelming in their beauty.¹³ Nature is also a provider, as the city dwellers have to quickly learn. Like the locals, they regularly go to the forests in search of wood for their fire, mushrooms for cooking, and stones for building their garden wall. What was not tolerated in Germany is an integral part of Provençal daily routine. Such down-to-earth, practical activities simultaneously force a change in outlook: "Wenn man sich angewöhnt, immer nach Beute Ausschau zu halten, bekommt man einen ganz speziellen Blick" (p. 85f.). The cultural implications of the move from Germany to France are also manifold because the narrator and her partner swap modern, urban living for traditional, rural life that includes village festivals and bull fighting. They are confronted by and have to learn to adapt to what is portrayed as a more primitive society of hunters and gatherers, which for these former city-dwellers is not as easy as it might appear, hence the satirical opening line of the narrative: "Man kann einfach weggehen, dachte ich" (p. 7).

Moving from one country to another, leaving family behind and starting afresh, especially with a young child, is anything but easy for this mother whose partner spends most of his time in other countries on business. Again and again the author highlights the loneliness and fears of her narrator, yet ironically her main reason for leaving the city was to leave behind the fear of others, such as not feeling safe unless the door was locked. In her new home she still experiences feelings of fear but now these relate to uncertainty of the unknown after having left one familiar world and not yet having taken root in the new one. She is suspended between two cultures: "Es war ein kaltes Gefühl von bodenlos [...] ich wurde plötzlich vor innerer Kälte ganz starr, und dann merkte ich, daß ich Angst hatte, weil ich weggegangen war und weil man nicht so einfach weggehen kann, sondern die Angst mitnimmt" (p. 87f.). This inner feeling of cold fear is starkly contrasted with her friends' belief that she is living in paradise. On her own in the house with the mistral wind raging, she reaches her lowest ebb, and hides under the bedcovers to seek warmth and safety: "Ich

¹³ Interviewed in 1999, Vanderbeke stated that 'Starry Night over the Rhône' was her favourite van Gogh painting and that it was the catalyst for the story: "Und dann mußte die Geschichte erst einmal einige Jahre wachsen. Es war mir aber die ganze Zeit klar, es wird eine Geschichte über das Sehen, über die Wahrnehmung. Weil die Blicke sich ändern wenn man in ein anderes Land zieht." Niessen: Birgit Vanderbeke: Ein Gespräch über das Leben und die Liebe, p. 7. The first-person narrator is an art historian and is writing a series of radio programmes about different artists. She delays writing 'van Gogh for Children' until the end of the narrative because of the dilemma she encounters about the colours she sees in his paintings and those in reality, as well as the reproductions by other people and their reactions to the colours. The second edition (Munich: Piper, 2014) no longer shows the painting, instead there are some colourful balloons attached to a wire so that they cannot fly away from what appears to be an outdoor event, a celebration or festivity. It is a cheerful, positive image but not as thought-provoking and not as meaningful as the van Gogh painting.

merkte, daß ich eine Welt hierher mitgebracht hatte, die hier nicht galt, und daß ich mit meiner mitgebrachten oder der wirklichen Welt die Welt hier nicht begreifen konnte, nicht das Heiße, nicht das Kalte, nicht das Blau und nicht das Gelb" (p. 113). In this one sentence the author encapsulates the problem of moving from one culture to another, of having expectations that a new country does not necessarily fulfil. It is only when she comes to terms with fact that she is undergoing a process of change and learning to see things for what they are, that is, the night sky is black and not greenish-blue, as van Gogh would have her believe, and the stars are small and silvery white, not yellow on the inside and green on the outside, as depicted in 'Starry Night over the Rhône'; when her outlook on life is her own and not van Gogh's or her mother's perspective; only then can she feel at ease in a world of different viewpoints:

Ich merkte, wie es mir einen Moment lang nichts ausmachte, daß die eine Welt und die andere und die wirkliche nicht zusammenpassen. Ich lachte und sagte, was du nicht siehst. René lachte auch und sagte, was du nicht siehst. (p. 121)

A child's guessing game, the *I spy* of the book's title, can easily turn into an adult game of scoring points. In Vanderbeke's narrative it constitutes a playful, almost erotic, part of the relationship between the narrator and her partner, but in its very nature the game sets a challenge, one person's skills of observation against another's. In unfamiliar surroundings the game takes on a new meaning, because the love relationship has to also start again. The two adults have been apart for a while, both living in different cultures. For the relationship to work, they both have to acknowledge that they themselves have changed and need to get to know one another once more by experiencing the new home together. The journey of the narrator to find happiness for herself is not just about self-discovery and self-realization, but it is also a rediscovery of the relationship with her partner, of overcoming the physical and emotional distance between them: "[...]ich bin dir doch wohl nicht fremd, und ich sagte, du bist mir nicht fremd. Ich glaube, wir sind mir fremd". (p. 72) After weeks of separation, living together has to be relearned.

Thus Vanderbeke's narrative of changing perspectives and new perceptions works on a personal as well as on a socio-political level: whether we focus on love and friendship, cultural diversities, city versus country living, the discarding of old mentalities and new beginnings, all become magnified in the intense bright light of Provence. Like van Gogh, since moving to the South of France, this author has become fascinated by the impact of light, in this case on her writing:

Entscheidend ist der Faktor Licht. Licht ist viel wichtiger als ich früher gedacht habe. Es inspiriert ganz anders und hebt die Texte an, so daß sie, glaube ich, leichter werden.¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview with Martin Oehlen, Kölner Stadt Anzeiger, 27.04.1998.

Here she plays on the stereotypes by integrating clichés into the narrative, thus making the playful mood an important component of the text. Interviewed a year before the publication, she noted:

Der Humor ist mir A und O. Ich könnte nicht eine Zeile ohne diesen Humor schreiben. Ich halte ihn für eines der tragfähigsten Hilfsmittel, um das ganze Elend zu überstehen. Im Leben und im Schreiben.¹⁵

This lightness of touch manifests itself not only in the depiction of the characters and their interaction with one another but also in the treatment of the animal world. The pet cat makes the journey with the narrator and her son. As soon as she is released from her basket, she rushes into the undergrowth to return with a mouse. Since she has no idea that she could eat the mouse, she instead runs back and forwards with it squeaking in her mouth: “Ich mußte lachen, weil sie so stolz aussah und zugleich so verwirrt und dämlich” (p. 36). Like her owners, she will learn to adapt to her new environment. She must also become accustomed to a local cat, which the French neighbour refers to as “Glückskatze”, because it is a tortoiseshell. The narrator notes on many occasions that this shy, thin, sick-looking cat with only half a face and only half its body covered with hair is, like her, looking for a new home and wants to be accepted by her family.¹⁶ She becomes ‘whole’ again, once the narrator adopts her, cares for her and shows her affection. By the end of the narrative she gives birth to four kittens, who are also tortoiseshells.¹⁷ As Birgit Ritter points out, this cat can be regarded as an alter ego for the narrator, since her move to France is akin to that of a healing process.¹⁸ Clearly contentment is achieved in this narrative when there is acceptance, actively and passively, in word and deed, of the highs and lows of a new culture and a different way of life.

¹⁵ Interview with Martin Oehlen, 27.04.1998.

¹⁶ The word ‘Glück’ means happiness or luck and is derived from the Middle High German word ‘Gelücke’, which originally designated the outcome of chance in both a positive and negative sense. In his recent study of unhappiness, Wilhelm Schmid explains how in ancient cultures people could trace both good fortune and misfortune back to the same source and were thus able to accept both with equanimity. In his opinion, more than anything, happiness is a matter of luck. See Wilhelm Schmid: *High on Low: Harnessing the Power of Unhappiness*. Translated by Karen Leeder. New York: Upper West Side Philosophers, 2014. According to folklore, tortoiseshell cats bring luck, especially in love, and they are nearly always female.

¹⁷ Vanderbeke is a cat-lover. In 2008, when she owned five cats, she published a poem entitled “la chatte disparue”, in which the cat goes on her most beautiful walk in the twilight hours before disappearing into the night. See Jürgen Christen: *Katzen und ihre Schriftsteller*. Berlin: Autorenhaus, 2008, p. 16.

¹⁸ Birgit Ritter: *Migration im literarischen Spiegel: Ich sehe was, was Du nicht siehst von Birgit Vanderbeke*. In: *Cahiers d'études Germaniques. Migration et biographie Allemands en France, Français en Allemagne après 1945*, Nr. 43, 2002, p. 129-38, here p. 138.

In her latest novel, *Der Sommer der Wildschweine* (2014), Vanderbeke pursues this theme of learning to adapt to a rural, traditionally-rooted lifestyle, when her German city-dwellers (they live in Frankfurt am Main), Milan and Leo, go on a summer holiday abroad (the first since their children left home) to the Cévennes, where they have rented a holiday home from a work colleague in the sparsely populated village of Fontarèche.¹⁹ The reader is once again transported to southern France, to what is ostensibly an idyllic setting and a simple, rustic way of life, where the locals are at one with nature, farming the land, growing their own vegetables, making olive oil and their own wine, tending to their sheep and breeding Angora rabbits for food as well as wool. The sustainability of this lifestyle is, however, under threat from man and beast.²⁰ In this story (and in reality) an oil company is drilling for gas in the mountains, where the shale gas reserves are bountiful.²¹ Along with the locals, the holidaymakers experience the ground trembling and are advised not to drink the tap water. They also witness how the barbed wire fences surrounding farmland, their gardens and small holdings have been cut, thus allowing

¹⁹ Fontarèche is situated on the edge of the Parc National des Cévennes, which was created in 1970 to protect and preserve its life, landscape, and architectural heritage. In 2011 it became a UNESCO world heritage site. The mountains are clothed in forests of oaks, pines and sweet chestnut groves, which explains the depiction of chestnuts in the foreground of the cover sleeve set against a background of grey rock. Most of the roofs in the area are made of local shale. The region remained remote and inaccessible well into the twentieth century. In the late sixties, it became the promised land of the hippies, who moved into the many abandoned farms and hamlets, whose inhabitants had been driven away by hardship and poverty. More recently, Dutch and Germans have started to colonize this area. This may have partly something to do with similar characteristics because, according to Lucy Wadham, a British novelist, who has lived for twenty years in France, first in Paris, then in the Cévennes mountains, the Protestant Cévenols have different values and traditions to their neighbours in the Catholic plains of the Languedoc: "They champion integrity, punctuality, rigour and hard work over beauty, charm, art and leisure". Lucy Wadham: *The Secret Life of France*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009, p. 256. In the novel, the nearest supermarket is twenty kilometres away and for the visitors to the region it has a plentiful stock of sausages for grilling and beer, which would encourage the Germans and Dutch to feel at home.

²⁰ In her study of ecologically responsible living, Teresa Belton translates happiness as well-being, when we begin to see how a concern for the condition of humanity can complement a concern for the condition of non-human nature. See Teresa Belton: *Happier People Healthier Planet: How Putting Wellbeing First Would Help Sustain Life On Earth*. Bristol: SilverWood, 2014.

²¹ In 2010 two oil companies had been permitted to undertake exploratory drilling in the area, a year later, after numerous protests by environmentalists, France became the first country in the world to have a ban on fracking. See <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-10-04/france-to-keep-fracking-ban-to-protect-environment-sarkozy-says.html> (last accessed 15.01.2015). Those who campaign against hydraulic fracturing point out that the industry is unregulated and therefore unsafe. It has the potential to damage the environment, agriculture and wildlife and cause health risks.

the wild boar to enter and cause havoc. The speculation is that the oil company, having scared the boars from the mountains with their drilling, by cutting the fences ‘encourage’ these beasts to devastate the vegetation in the villages and kill the sheep and rabbits, the intention being to ‘encourage’ the locals to sell their land to them and leave. Boars are known to be aggressive and unpredictable if they are frightened, which would also have a negative impact on the local tourist industry.²² Vanderbeke uses the boars as a metaphor for a potential crisis, a financial as well as a natural crisis. She may well be alluding to a human form of ‘pigs’, those connected to the oil company, at the same time. By the end of the story, Milan, an industrial designer, comes to the aid of the villagers by creating small ultra sound boxes, which are positioned next to the fences and successfully deter the boars.

It is worth noting at this point that since the late 1980s theories of happiness have linked well-being to sustainable development and the extent to which local environmental conditions can have a positive effect on the psychological health of an individual.²³ This is substantiated by the popularity of outdoor wilderness activities, gardening, man’s relationship with animals, and fondness for natural scenery. Nature and natural settings have also been shown to provide relaxation and restorative benefits. Hence, any changes to the environment especially in the vicinity of homes, such as the building of nuclear power stations, hazardous waste sites, or as in the case of Vanderbeke’s novel, fracking, can have a negative psychological impact and thus affect well-being. Moreover, damage to the planet is seen as damage to the self because “an ecological identity encompasses the self, the human and non-human community, and the planet’s ecosystems”.²⁴ In *Wildschweine* the ground does literally shake beneath the feet of the holidaymakers as they experience earth tremors caused by fracking and they see how the villagers face the risk of land-grabbing by the company. Vanderbeke thus depicts the extent to which rural life is being endangered and transformed in both psychological and physical terms.

The ability of a community, including newcomers and holidaymakers, to face extremes, be they man-made or natural, together is evident in both novels. Neighbours who help each other in times of crisis, as the narrator experiences in *Ich sehe was*, similarly have an important role to play in *Wildschweine*, when a powerful summer storm causes flooding and power lines are brought down.²⁵ The urbanites,

²² In *Ich sehe was*, there is one reference to boars, not in terms of danger but in terms of boar meat as a delicacy. The French neighbour is keen to give the newcomers some of the meat, which they happily accept, from the boar he has hunted and killed.

²³ See Sam Thompson, Nic Marks and Tim Jackson: Well-Being and Sustainable Development. In: David et al. (eds): *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, p. 498-516.

²⁴ Elizabeth Nisbet, John Zelenski and Steven Murphy: Happiness is in our Nature: Exploring Nature Relatedness as a Contributor to Subject Well-Being. In: *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12/2 (2011), p. 303-22, here p. 304.

²⁵ The épisode cévenol is when the cold air from the Atlantic meets the warm air from the Mediterranean, resulting in heavy rain and flash floods. See Lucy Wadham, ‘Hidden France: the Cévennes mountains’. In: *The Guardian* 24.04.2010

who have brought their work with them on holiday and go to bed with their laptops and mobile phones, lose contact with the rest of the world, have no phone line, no internet connection. The technology they have become reliant on for work and play no longer functions. Vanderbeke shows how the failure of technology brings the community together, and how they support one another, including Milan and Leo. Interestingly, recent research on happiness suggests that the benefits of spending time in green space may extend beyond the individual to the community level to include such aspects as community cohesion and social interaction among neighbours.²⁶

In *Ich sehe was* the protagonist consciously adopts a simple, lower-consumption lifestyle, whereas Milan and Leo in *Wildschweine* are forced, albeit temporarily, to downshift as the trappings of their modern lifestyle lose significance: vegetables can be non-standard in shape and size; eggs are not stamped with dates and personal appearances are not so important, illustrated by the observation that pensioners have not had facelifts. Emily Jeremiah points out in her analysis of *Ich sehe was*: “Keeping a cat and growing plants serve to root the narrator, who also experiences a beneficial fusion of technology and tradition”, and this is also true of this latest novel.²⁷ Whilst in *Ich sehe was*, René notes that they are leading “ein komisches Leben” (p. 84) because they have computers in every room and yet are going to gather wood in the forest, in *Wildschweine*, Milan uses his technological know-how to help the locals protect themselves and their property against the boars and the oil company. Vanderbeke underlines the benefits of combining technology and tradition, not only in financial terms but also as a lifestyle choice, albeit temporarily, for this family. Both mother and daughter have turned their passion for knitting into earning potential: Leo runs her own agency ‘text und textil’, selling hand knitted pullovers and advertising text online; Anouk supplements the family’s earning with the success of her pullover knitting pattern, for which her brother, Johnny, designed the software package. The narrator (Leo) unravels her love for wool and knitting as well her daughter’s obsession (she discovered knitting at the age of four). An enthusiastic environmentalist, Anouk knits ‘yarn bombs’, during her internship for a New York fashion designer, as a form of protest against mulesing in Australia.²⁸ The positive impact a traditional, creative handicraft has on their modern lives is summed up by Leo’s repeated comment: “Stricken ist gut gegen die Angst” (p. 21,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/24/cevennes-mountains-south-of-france> (last accessed 16.01.2015).

²⁶ See Thompson, Marks and Jackson: Well-Being and Sustainable Development, p. 498-516.

²⁷ Emily Jeremiah: Nomadic Ethics in Contemporary Women’s Writing in German, p. 53.

²⁸ Mulesing is the practice of cutting away chunks of wool-bearing skin from the buttocks of young sheep without anaesthetic in order to prevent flystrike, and is still legal in Australia. Yarnbombing, also called yarnstorming, graffiti knitting, knifiti or guerrilla knitting, has become popular during the past decade and is a form of street art, whereby people leave knitted items in public places or cover a public object in colourful yarn.

p. 138).²⁹ From her perspective the reader sees how the next generation finds happiness and life satisfaction in the 3D world of computer simulations (Johnny) or in the art of knitting (Anouk). The community spirit that Leo and Milan, and indeed the narrator and her husband in *Ich sehe was*, experience in actuality at local level, is globally possible through Web 2.0, by sharing ideas and selling products, and allows this family to communicate and work together, wherever they are in the world. In terms of handicrafts, such as knitting, the family does benefit from the internet. Vanderbeke thus illustrates how the old meets the new; how the internet provides knitters with blogs and networking sites, such as ravelry.com, as an alternative to Facebook. Knitting as well as other crafts, have recently enjoyed a renaissance, which is due in part to the internet, since it allows younger people in particular to merge their interest in new technology with traditional crafts. Additionally, high street fashion has played its role along with the acknowledgement that knitting is a form of therapy. All of these aspects appear in *Wildschweine*, reflecting what David Gauntlett describes as the intersection of creativity, craft and community in the twenty-first century. In *Making is Connecting* (2011) he argues that a shift from a 'sit-back-and-be-told culture' to a 'making-and-doing culture' is necessary and essential for the happiness and survival of modern societies.³⁰ In other words, by making and doing things, people have projects which contribute to satisfaction with life, and so they become creative participants, not just consumers. According to Gauntlett, this active engagement with the world results in happiness, because creativity is a way of sharing meaningful things or ideas which form bridges between people and communities. In terms of theories on happiness, "experiments show that happy people tend to be relatively more creative."³¹

The contemporary issues explored in relation to this rural French village do chime with global concerns, namely the possible disappearance of traditional handicrafts due to computer software and 3D printers; the environmental damage inflicted on the most picturesque areas, when gas is extracted from shale. On the other hand, *Wildschweine* also shows that it is through the internet that many people

²⁹ Birgit Vanderbeke: *Der Sommer der Wildschweine*. Munich: Piper, 2014. References will be provided in the main text. Throughout the novel Vanderbeke refers to Elizabeth Zimmermann (1910-1999), who is regarded as having revolutionized the modern practice of knitting through her many publications on how to knit, her innovative knitting patterns, and the company she founded, importing and selling knitting yarn. Further details at:

<http://knitting.about.com/od/knittingcommunity/p/Elizabeth-Zimmermann.htm> (last accessed 16.01.2015).

³⁰ See David Gauntlett: *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011, in particular chapter 5 on the value of connecting equating to personal happiness. Alongside the book, there is also a website with links to videos and related webpages: www.makingisconnecting.org (last accessed 07.07.2015).

³¹ Katherine Jacobs Bao and Sonja Lyubomirsky: The Rewards of Happiness. In: David et al. (eds): *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, p. 119-233, here p. 126.

are developing an interest in traditional crafts, such as knitting, and that support for environmental protests can be garnered worldwide. Certainly, globalisation makes its presence felt at a local level. Yet it is when the electric power fails and the holidaymakers truly ‘switch off’ that the community spirit, as well as the support network of the family, are discovered and show their potential to make everyday life more fulfilling, richer and ultimately happier. For Vanderbeke, raising such themes through the creativity of her writing is her personal protest against global pressures, be they man-made or natural, physical or psychological:

Ich bin in den letzten 15 Jahren einfach immer wütender geworden. Ratloser natürlich auch, weil die Kluft zwischen dem, was ich denke, lebe, wünsche, träume, und dem, was die Welt so praktiziert, weil sie sich medial formuliert und was sie so alles vergessen hat, nicht mehr nur unüberwindlich ist, sondern täglich größer wird. Dass man diese Kluft überwinden könnte, denkt man sich oder hofft es zumindest, wenn man mit dem Erzählen einmal ernsthaft anfängt.³²

Do the two novels discussed here evidence that living the dream, finding fulfilment and contentment in the form of a better quality of life, is achievable in the twenty-first century? In his discussion of the notions of the good life, Ruut Veenhoven draws on, amongst others, life satisfaction theory, emotional state theory and hedonism, as mentioned at the start of this paper. He focuses on the differences between the external and internal qualities of life, such as the liveability of the environment (standard of living) and ‘life-ability’ (how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life). He points out that when defining happiness in terms of psychology, simply feeling good is not everything. In his words “the essence of a good life is seen in ‘living good’ rather than in ‘enjoying life’ and living good (*sic*) is seen as ‘psychological development’.”³³ Happiness thus seems to accompany a harmony between thoughts, feelings and actions. Without doubt, Vanderbeke’s first-person narrators do succeed in ‘living good’ and achieving a work-life balance by living in harmony with their surroundings.

Both texts highlight that a person’s quality of life definitely improves once a community is truly supportive and family and friends actually come together to savour the delights of a new culture and different way of living. I began this discussion with reference to a 1998 interview with Vanderbeke in which she already at that time, five years after re-locating, stated that she had fulfilled a dream by moving to the south of France. When asked another five years later about what had attracted her to Provence, she commented on the relaxed attitude to life of the locals, their appreciation of creativity and handicrafts and the better quality of life overall.

³² Tina Uhlmann, ‘Wildschweinereien im globalen Dorf’, 11.07.2014, Berner Zeitung at <http://www.bernerzeitung.ch/kultur/buecher/Wildschweinereien-im-globalen-Dorf/story/27330402> (last accessed 16.01.2015).

³³ Ruut Veenhoven: Notions of the good life. In: David et al. (eds): The Oxford Handbook of Happiness., p.161-73, here p.171.

She was also of the opinion that the cliché-ridden image the Germans had of ‘living like God in France’ suggested that they had no idea about everyday French life.³⁴ From her perspective, and as evidenced in these two narratives, living the dream is about far more than purely seeking pleasure, instead it is one that provides fulfilment and contentment.

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³⁴ Iris Alanyali: ‘Der deutsche Akzent ist niedlich’. In: Die Welt, 18.01.2003. <http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article342591/Der-deutsche-Akzent-ist-niedlich.html> (last accessed 09.07.2015).